DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 217 354 CG 015 960

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TITLE Family Therapy and the School System.
PUB DATE Oct 81
NOTE 6p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Council on Family Relations (Milwaukee, WI, October 13-17, 1981).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Behavior Problems; *Change Strategies; *Child Development; *Counselor Role; Elementary Secondary Education; *Family Counseling; Family Environment; *Family School Relationship; Learning Problems; Models; Peer Relationship; *Problem Children; Student Development; Therapists

ABSTRACT

This paper addresses the task of the family therapist who is called upon when remediation attempts between school and family fail to produce favorable results with a child identified as a problem pupil. The job of the therapist in dismantling the system that is detrimental to the child and reorganizing one that enhances development is discussed along with problems that are likely to be faced. A therapy strategy is outlined which is divided into four basic sections, including work with: (1) the child; (2) the family; (3) the school; and (4) the teacher-parent group meeting. For each of these areas, several suggestions and guidelines are enumerated and discussed. (NRB)

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FAMILY THERAPY AND THE SCHOOL SYSTEM

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Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Council on Family Relations, Milwaukee, WI, October 13-17, 1981.

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Family Therapy and the School System

N.C.F.R. Annual Meeting 1981, Milwaukee, WI.

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Parents and teachers of a child identified as a 'problem pupil' tend to find themselves in an adversarial position when causes of the problem and remedial steps must be discussed. Ideally parents and teachers should be cooperative partners in the guidance of the child - yet this frequently is not the case. Structurally, the school system and family system are not in a cooperative configuration. Parents tend to judge the school responsible for the child's behavior in school, or at least responsible for correction of aberrant behavior; while the school group of teachers and administrators feel that the parent(s) hold primary influence over the child's behavior. Thus, parent-school conferences easily degenerate into defensive posturing by both "sides".

The family therapist is in a unique position to facilitate positive change between the two systems. The family - or, more typically, the child - is referred for outside help when repeated remediation attempts between school and family fail to produce favorable results. The therapist is faced with the formidible task of 1) learning the overall situation, 2) dealing with distraught parents, 3) establishing personal rapport with the child, 4) establishing a relationship with the school, and finally 5) developing a therapy program that reestablishes harmony and produces productive change.

Therapists who work in such situations quickly find that the child is often the victim of the interworkings of the family and school systems. The child may occupy some derogatory role position in the family system, such as the "scapegoat", or the "dummy". Such a definition, self-incorporated by the child and carried into the school system, sets up the possibility of a self-fulfilling prophecy wherein teachers unconciously reify the definition as they respond to the child. At this point both systems, family and school, may begin to engage in "blame the victim", and the system now operates to perpetuate itself.

The therapist must dismantle the sytem that now works to the increasing detriment of the child and reorganize one that enhances the child's development. Behavioral problems of the child usually include poor school performance (failure to perform work, turn in assignments, take tests), asocial behavior (acting out or withdrawal), ostracism by peers,

truancy, excessive illness absences. Also, longterm real learning loss usually has occurred by the time the professional referral is made. Thus, the problem is not just the formidable one of dealing with the family and school system, but also learning loss of the child, and peer relation problems.

Therapy Strategy

A. Work with Child

1. Learn child's self-perceptions. How does he/she describe him/her self. How does child perceive others' perception of him/her; parents, peers, teachers. Does child perceive "labels" being given to him/her by other people, i.e., dumb, fat, ugly, bully, weird, etc.?

2. Observe childs "learning style". What interests does child have; what details do they know. Test where appropriate. Can child direct attention outward, or is he/she mostly focused inward on own behavior and problems. (Learning is an act of "giving").
During therapy with the child, do some teaching one week, and then, through questioning the next week, demonstrate to child that he/she can learn.

3. Find out child's attitude toward teachers and school authorities. Do they approach or avoid teachers? (problem kids usually avoid teachers, and a therapy task is to teach them to approach teachers; ask them questions, talk with them, etc.).

4. As therapy progresses, integrate knowledge of child as individual with knowledge of family and school systems.

B. Work with Family

1. Learn parents' perception of problem; their concept of the causal circumstances. From the information, discern how much control they think they have over the situation; also their willingness to cooperate in a plan for change. (the latter may take some time, since parents usually express willingness verbally but sometimes do not follow through behaviorally).

2. Find out history of parents interaction with the school. Also find out their pattern of school involvement when they were kids. Voiced attitudes toward school and actual interaction may vary considerably.

3. Learn parent's method of dealing with the problem. How responsible do they feel? What is their pattern of dealing

with the problem, i.e.; do they punish (if so, how) do they threaten; do they withdraw; do they lecture, etc. From this, what seems to be their attitude toward the child?

4. Reorient parents to more effective interaction with child and school that is still compatible with some of their beliefs.

C. Work with School

Group meeting with as many teachers who have taught the child as can be gathered.

1. Listen to teachers' perceptions of the problem. What is the group attitude toward the child, and the child's parents. Often the history of the problem is long and consistent. Generally, teachers have formed a group opinion of the child that has been passed along from year to year, and can have the elements of a "self-fulfilling prophecy".

2. Acknowledge the elements you have observed that are consistent with teacher observations. But also describe some of the positive characteristics of the child, especially learning style and ability, to the teachers. Ask who has observed the same things in the child. The task here is to shift the group's attention to positive possibilities for the child. Teachers, I have always found, are true to their calling, and once oriented to the learning potential of a child will begin a positive group interaction as to how they can contribute to the childs improvement. This type of group meeting shifts teachers from their typical individual orientation to the child to a group effort.

3. Discuss the teachers experience with the child's parents.

D. Teacher-Parent Group Meeting

The purpose is to shift from any antagonism between parents and teachers to cooperation for the benefit of the child.

1. Sit near the parent. When only one parent is present I sit next to him/her. (Since parents are outnumbered, and are meeting in the school, they can be intimidated easily).

2. Take charge of the meeting. Review the problem; set goals; tell how they can be reached from your knowledge of the child. Ask teachers for their ideas to facilitate positive change. Ask parents for their ideas.

3. Organize plan for change.

   a. What is to be done daily and weekly.

b. Who has specific responsibilities.

c. How will parent - school communication take place.

d. How will emergencies be handled.

e. How, and how often, will evaluation occur

4. State how you will continue to be involved.